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The U.S. Senate

Foreign Relations Committee

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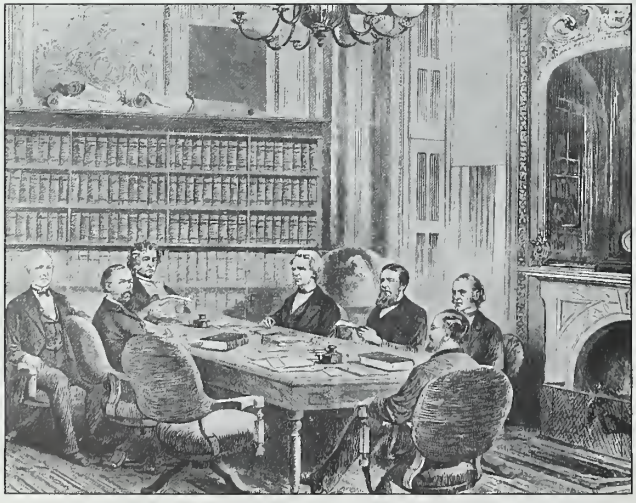
The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Meeting in the Capitol, 1901.

History of the Committee

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was established in 1816 as one of the original ten standing committees of the Senate. Throughout its history, the committee has been instrumental in developing and influencing United States foreign policy, at different times supporting and opposing the policies of presidents and secretaries of state. The committee has considered, debated, and reported important treaties and legislation, ranging from the purchase of Alaska in 1867 to the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. It also holds jurisdiction over all diplomatic nominations. Through these powers, the committee has helped shape foreign policy of broad significance, in matters of war and peace and international relations. Members of the committee have assisted in the negotiation of treaties, and at times have helped to defeat treaties they felt were not in the national interest.

The Foreign Relations Committee was instrumental in the rejection of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and 1920, and in the passage of the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and Marshall Plan in 1948. A bipartisan spirit prevailed as the committee confronted the perils of the Cold War. However, the state of almost constant crisis that the Cold War spawned eventually resulted in the vast expansion of presidential authority over foreign policy. Since the 1960s, the committee has sought to redress this imbalance of powers.



The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, with Senator Charles Sumner presiding at the far end of the table. Harper's Weekly, February 11, 1871.

Chairmen of the Committee

Membership on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has reflected the diverse regions, interests, and politics of the nation. Chairmen of the committee have included lawyers, scholars, journalists, secretaries of state, presidential candidates, and even a gold miner. Among the more notable chairmen in the nineteenth century were Henry Clay, James Buchanan, Charles Sumner, and John Sherman. Some of those who shaped foreign policy in the twentieth century include:

Henry Cabot Lodge (R–MA)
Chairman 1919–1924

Henry Cabot Lodge assumed the chairmanship of the Foreign Relations Committee late in his Senate career, although he had been a member of the committee since 1895. As chairman, Lodge was immediately thrust into the spotlight during the debate on adoption of the Treaty of Versailles, including the League of Nations covenant. Lodge led the opposition against the treaty, convinced that the nation's sovereignty was at stake and that compulsory arbitration would bind the United States to international commitments that the country would not or could not keep. Through delaying tactics, and by introducing a series of amendments, Lodge worked to defeat the treaty in the Senate.

Tom Connally
(D–TX)
Chairman 1941–1947
and 1949–1953

Chairman Tom Connally (right) conferring with Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

During his decade as chairman, Senator Connally became a strong voice for bipartisanship in foreign policy. A long-time Wilsonian internationalist, he supported such international ventures as the Reciprocal Trade Act, Lend-Lease, and the Selective Service Act. As chairman he was a loyal supporter of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations' foreign policies. Connally sponsored the United Nations charter for ratification in the Senate, supported the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, and gained Senate endorsement for United States participation in NATO. Despite his allegiance to the administration, Connally was long regarded as a "watchdog" over State Department activities.

Arthur H. Vandenberg
(R–MI)
Chairman 1947–1949

Upon entering the Senate, Arthur H. Vandenberg initially adopted an isolationist position, defending neutrality legislation and opposing United States entry into World War II. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, he dramatically reversed his stand. As chairman, Vandenberg espoused bipartisanship, building Republican support for the Democratic administration's foreign policies, which helped to commit the United States to an active role in restoring the postwar world and in attempting to contain Soviet expansionism. While Vandenberg's tenure as chairman was limited to two years, his influence was evident in the continued bipartisanship of his successors.

J. William Fulbright
(D–AR)
Chairman 1959–1975

William Fulbright had already established an eminent reputation in foreign affairs when he assumed chairmanship of the committee. His open criticism of the Eisenhower administration's foreign policy marked a dramatic break from the bipartisan tradition of his predecessors. Fulbright also did not hesitate to challenge presidents of his own party. Privately, he counseled President John F. Kennedy against the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Blockade, and publicly he broke with President Lyndon B. Johnson over Vietnam. He sponsored a series of televised committee hearings on the Vietnam war, and continued his opposition to militant trends in United States foreign policy in his speeches and books. Fulbright opposed further widening of the war in Vietnam, but endorsed the Nixon administration's overtures toward détente with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

Jesse Helms
(R–NC)
Chairman 1995–

The current chairman is Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina. First elected to the Senate in 1972, he later served as chairman of the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee. He became chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in 1995, where he regularly presides over weekly business meetings, hearings, and hosts foreign dignitaries.

Prepared under the direction of the U.S. Senate Commission on Art. For further information write: Office of the Senate Curator, Room S–411, U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C. 20510–7102.

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History of the Committee Rooms

During the nineteenth century, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee met in a variety of rooms in the United States Capitol. Following World War I, these quarters proved too small and inaccessible to accommodate the committee's expanding responsibilities. In 1933, the committee moved into its current suite in the Capitol. While the Foreign Relations Committee maintains several offices spread over four buildings, the two rooms in the Capitol have become symbolic of the committee and its work.

These rooms, S–116 and S–117, were first occupied around 1859 with the completion of the new Senate wing of the Capitol. Until their assignment to the Foreign Relations Committee, the rooms housed a variety of tenants. Former occupants, whose names are reflective of the concerns of a growing nation, included the committees on Retrenchment, Patents, Agriculture, Immigration, Territories, Female Suffrage, and Naval Affairs. At the turn of the century, S–116 even served as the Senate's post office.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee uses these rooms to receive visiting dignitaries and to conduct national security briefings and hearings in executive session. The rooms have hosted American presidents, heads of foreign nations, secretaries of state and defense, ambassadors, and others who have informed and advised the committee in its fulfillment of the Senate's constitutional role in foreign policy.

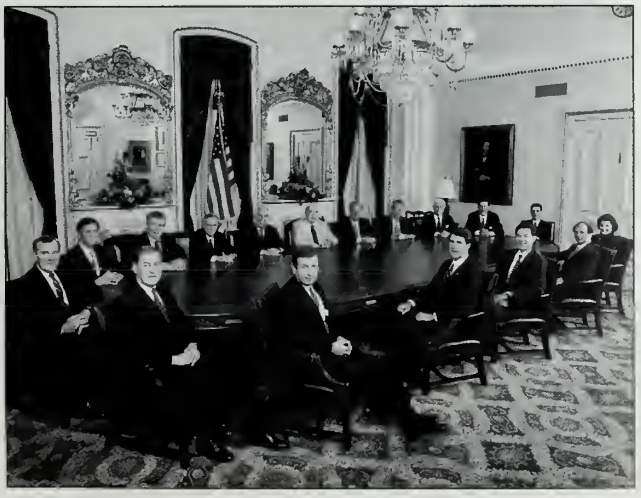
Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir holds a press briefing outside the Foreign Relations Committee Room with committee members in attendance.

S–116 Room History

Congress	Date	Occupant
40th	1869	Senate Folding Room
41st	1870	Committee on Retrenchment
42nd	1872	Committee on Patents
47th	1882	Committee on Patents and Committee on Female Suffrage
48th	1885	Committee on Patents
54th	1896	Senate Post Office
63rd	1914	Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
64th	1916	Committee on Contingent Expenses
65th	1917	Committee on Industrial Expositions
65th	1918	Committee on Immigration
68th	1924	Committee on Territories
69th	1926	Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions
71st	1929	Committee on Printing
72nd	1932	Committee on Naval Affairs
73rd	1933	Committee on Foreign Relations

S–117 Room History

Congress	Date	Occupant
40th	1869	Committee on Post-Offices and Post-Roads
54th	1896	Committee on Foreign Relations
57th	1902	Committee on Printing
61st	1910	Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
63rd	1914	Committee on the Library
64th	1915	Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
65th	1918	Committee on the Census
67th	1921	Committee on Enrolled Bills
68th	1923	Committee on Naval Affairs
73rd	1933	Committee on Foreign Relations



The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, September 1997.

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ıe Committee

Name	Party/State	Dates of Service
James Barbour	(DR–VA)	1816–1818
Nathaniel Macon	(DR–NC)	1818–1819
James Brown	(DR–LA)	1819–1820
James Barbour	(DR–VA)	1820–1821
Rufus King	(F–NY)	1821–1822
James Barbour	(DR/CRR–VA)	1822–1825
Nathaniel Macon	(J–NC)	1825–1826
Nathan Sanford	(Adams–NY)	1826–1827
Nathaniel Macon	(J–NC)	1827–1828
Littleton Tazewell	(J–VA)	1828–1832
John Forsyth	(J–GA)	1832–1833
William Wilkins	(J–PA)	1833–1834
Henry Clay	(AJ–KY)	1834–1836
James Buchanan	(D–PA)	1836–1841
William C. Rives	(W–VA)	1841–1842
William Archer	(W–VA)	1842–1845
William Allen	(D–OH)	1845–1846
Ambrose Sevier	(D–AR)	1846–1848
Edward Hannegan	(D–IN)	1848–1849
Thomas Hart Benton	(D–MO)	Mar. 1849
William R. King	(D–AL)	1849–1850
Henry S. Foote	(D–MS)	1850–1851
James Mason	(D–VA)	1851–1861
Charles Sumner	(R–MA)	1861–1871
Simon Cameron	(R–PA)	1871–1877
Hannibal Hamlin	(R–ME)	1877–1879
William Eaton	(D–CT)	1879–1881
Ambrose E. Burnside	(R–RI)	Mar. 1881
George F. Edmunds	(R–VT)	Oct. 1881
William Windom	(R–MN)	1881–1883
John F. Miller	(R–CA)	1883–1886
John Sherman	(R–OH)	1886–1893
John T. Morgan	(D–AL)	1893–1895
John Sherman	(R–OH)	1895–1897
William P. Frye	(R–ME)	1897
Cushman Davis	(R–MN)	1897–1901
William P. Frye	(R–ME)	Mar. 1901
Shelby M. Cullom	(R–IL)	1901–1913
Augustus O. Bacon	(D–GA)	1913–1914
William J. Stone	(D–MO)	1914–1918
Gilbert M. Hitchcock	(D–NE)	1918–1919
Henry Cabot Lodge	(R–MA)	1919–1924
William E. Borah	(R–ID)	1924–1933
Key Pittman	(D–NV)	1933–1940
Walter F. George	(D–GA)	1940–1941
Tom Connally	(D–TX)	1941–1947
Arthur H. Vandenberg	(R–MI)	1947–1949
Tom Connally	(D–TX)	1949–1953
Alexander Wiley	(R–WI)	1953–1955
Walter F. George	(D–GA)	1955–1957
Theodore Francis Green	(D–RI)	1957–1959
J. William Fulbright	(D–AR)	1959–1974
John J. Sparkman	(D–AL)	1975–1979
Frank Church	(D–ID)	1979–1981
Jacob Javits	(R–NY)	Dec. 1980
Charles A. Percy	(R–IL)	1981–1985
Richard G. Lugar	(R–IN)	1985–1987
Claiborne Pell	(D–RI)	1987–1995
Jesse Helms	(R–NC)	1995–

Political Party Abbreviations

Adams—Adams, AJ—Anti-Jackson, CRR—Crawford Republican, D—Democrat, DR—Democratic Republican, F—Federalist, J—Jacksonian, R—Republican, W—Whig